

**Teaching and Learning to Program: A Qualitative Study of
Hong Kong Sub-Degree Students**

by

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Certificate of Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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Table of Contents

Certificate of Originality	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Definition of Terms	ix
List of Tables	xiii
List of Figures	xiv
Abstract	xv
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
1.1 Background to the Study	1
1.2 Module of the Study	4
1.3 Hong Kong Education System	8
1.3.1 Education System Reform	9
1.3.2 Nine-Year Free and Compulsory Education	9
1.3.3 Senior Secondary Education	10
1.3.4 Post Secondary Education.....	10
1.4 Hong Kong Students	12
1.5 Statement of the Problem	13
1.6 Research Questions	14
1.7 Methodology	16
1.8 Significance of the Study	17
1.9 Limitations and Delimitations.....	19
1.10 Organisation of the Dissertation.....	21
Chapter 2: Literature Review	24
2.1 Introduction	24
2.2 Teaching and Learning Programming: Content Overview	27
2.2.1 Introduction	27
2.2.2 Programs and Programming	27
2.2.3 Software Development.....	28
2.2.4 Programming Languages	29
2.2.4.1 <i>Generation of Programming Languages</i>	29
2.2.4.2 <i>Programming Paradigms</i>	30
2.2.4.3 <i>The JavaTM Programming Language</i>	33
2.2.5 Programming Knowledge	35
2.3 Teaching and Learning Programming: Methods.....	36

2.3.1	Theoretical Foundations.....	37
2.3.1.1	<i>Constructivism</i>	37
2.3.1.2	<i>Scaffolding</i>	41
2.3.2	Visual Methods.....	44
2.3.2.1	<i>Software Visualisation</i>	46
2.3.2.2	<i>Light-Weight Approach</i>	49
2.3.2.3	<i>Web-Based Approach</i>	49
2.3.2.4	<i>Integrated Approach</i>	52
2.3.2.5	<i>Summary of Visual Methods</i>	54
2.3.3	Non-Visual Methods	56
2.3.3.1	<i>Lecture and Lab Approach</i>	57
2.3.3.2	<i>Language Approach</i>	58
2.3.3.3	<i>Intelligent Approach</i>	60
2.3.3.4	<i>Other Approaches</i>	61
2.3.3.5	<i>Summary of Non-Visual Methods</i>	63
2.4	Teaching and Learning Programming: The Role of Individual Differences... 65	
2.4.1	Learning Motivation	66
2.4.1.1	<i>Motivation and Learning</i>	67
2.4.1.2	<i>Motivation and Computer Programming</i>	70
2.4.2	Challenges Faced by Learners	71
2.4.3	Learner Strategies.....	74
2.4.3.1	<i>Introduction</i>	74
2.4.3.2	<i>Strategy 1: CABLE Approach</i>	75
2.4.3.3	<i>Strategy 2: Building Viable Mental Models</i>	76
2.4.3.4	<i>Strategy 3: Scaffolding in Computer Programming</i>	78
2.4.3.5	<i>Summary of Learner Strategies</i>	81
2.4.4	Summary	81
2.5	Teaching and Learning Programming: Optimal Learning Conditions..... 82	
2.5.1	Introduction	82
2.5.2	General Models	83
2.5.3	Specific Approaches.....	87
2.5.4	Summary	90
2.6	Teaching and Learning Programming: The Role of Culture..... 91	
2.6.1	Western Misperceptions	92
2.6.2	The Confucian Tradition	96
2.6.3	The Hong Kong Students	99
2.6.4	Summary	103
2.7	Chapter Summary.....	104

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology	107
3.1 Introduction	107
3.2 A Survey of Recent Research Methods Relevant to the Teaching and Learning of Programming	108
3.2.1 Introduction	108
3.2.2 Quantitative Approach and Mixed Approach.....	109
3.2.3 Qualitative Approach	113
3.2.4 Summary	120
3.3 Research Methodology	122
3.3.1 Case Study Research	122
3.3.2 Grounded Theory Research.....	127
3.3.3 Comparison of Case Study with Grounded Theory	133
3.3.4 Choosing An Embedded Approach	134
3.4 Research Design and Procedures	138
3.5 Research Participants	140
3.5.1 Academic Background of Student Participants.....	140
3.5.2 Academic Background of Teacher Participants	142
3.6 Instruments	143
3.7 Data Analysis	144
3.8 Study Limitations	146
3.9 Ethical Issues.....	147
3.9.1 Conduct Ethical Research	147
3.9.2 Secure Informed Consent	148
3.9.3 Collect and Store Data	148
3.10 Chapter Summary.....	148
 Chapter 4: Findings	 150
4.1 Introduction	150
4.2 The Study	151
4.3 Data Collection	152
4.4 Initial Data Analysis	155
4.5 Open Coding	155
4.5.1 Learning Difficulties	156
4.5.2 Learning Strategies.....	158
4.5.3 Motivation and Attitude	159
4.5.4 Students' Perspectives	161
4.5.5 Teachers' Perspectives.....	162

4.6	Axial Coding	164
4.7	Selective Coding	168
4.8	Theory of Performance Improvement of Programming.....	171
4.9	Chapter Summary.....	173
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions		176
5.1	Introduction	176
5.2	Study Summary	177
5.3	Findings Overview	178
5.4	Theory Components	181
5.4.1	Students' Characteristics	182
5.4.2	Learning Difficulties	189
5.4.3	Poorly Structured Curriculum	193
5.4.4	Improvement Strategies	194
5.5	Contributions to the Field	203
5.6	Study Limitations	204
5.7	Recommendations for Future Research	205
5.8	Implications for Professional Practice	206
5.9	Conclusion	211
Appendices		212
Appendix A: Information Sheet		213
Appendix B: Consent Letter.....		214
Appendix C: Initial Questionnaire		215
Appendix D: Interview Questions: Set A.....		216
Appendix E: Interview Questions: Set B		217
Appendix F: Memo on Participant Observation		223
Appendix G: Analysis of Students' Assignments.....		228
Appendix H: Analysis of Students' Examination Scripts.....		235
Appendix I: General Reflective Memo		237
Appendix J: Codebook for Data Analysis.....		240
Appendix K: Categories and Coding		242
Appendix L: Major Categories Resulting from Axial Coding.....		261
Appendix M: VBA Programs Assisting Data Analysis.....		266
Appendix N: Interview Recordings		270
Appendix O: Organised Interview Transcripts		271
Bibliography		272

Definition of Terms

This section defines the key terms used throughout this dissertation.

Applet: One of the three kinds of Java programs: applets, standalone applications, and servlets. Applets are executed within web pages in client web browsers whereas servlets are executed in web servers.

C: One of the general-purpose programming languages. Some of the syntax in C is similar to that in C++ and Java.

C++: One of the general-purpose programming languages that is an improved extension to C with object-orientation features added.

Closed Laboratory Session: Supervised and scheduled laboratory session.

Compilation: A process that translates a high-level language program into a computer's machine code or some other low-level language (The British Computer Society 2002).

Compiler: A computer program that translates a high-level language program into a computer's machine code or some other low-level language (The British Computer Society 2002).

Confucius (孔子): A Latinised form of the Chinese name Kong Fuzi (孔夫子), Master Kong (551 BC – 479 BC). He was a great thinker and social philosopher whose teachings and philosophy have greatly influenced Chinese and Southeast Asian thought and life (Yao 2000).

Data Variable: A store in a program to hold a data value temporarily.

Eclipse: One of the most popular Integrated Development Environments (IDEs), mainly for developing programs in Java.

The Four Books: Chinese classic texts that Zhu Xi (四書), a great Neo-Confucian (理學), selected as an introduction to Confucianism: *The Great Learning* (大學), *The Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸), *The Analects of Confucius* (論語), and *The Mencius* (孟子). They investigate the fundamental principles of Chinese culture and focus on social and personal affairs (Yao 2000).

HKCEE: Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, a public examination taken by a student at the end of his/her five-year secondary education. A Hong Kong student is said to have graduated from secondary education if he/she has got five passes in HKCEE or equivalent.

HKIEd: The Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Integrated Development Environment (IDE): A programming tool which supports both novices and experts in writing programs in a computer programming language.

Intelligent Tutoring System (ITS): Educational software using artificial intelligence. The computer ‘learns’ from learner/user input and modifies its presentation of material accordingly (Hoven 1997).

Java: A general-purpose programming language. It is an object-oriented programming language that is used in a variety of platforms. Some of the syntax in Java is similar to that in C and C++.

Object-Oriented Programming (OOP): A programming paradigm that supports object technology. It is an evolutionary form of modular programming with more formal rules that allow pieces of software to be reused and interchanged among programs. OOP is thought to increase productivity by allowing programmers to focus on higher-level software objects (Intrinsyc Software 2001).

Paired Programming: A practice in which two programmers work collaboratively at one computer to generate program designs, algorithms, or program codes.

Program Analysis: The (automated) inspection of a program to infer some property. Program analysis is needed for most kinds of program transformation and can range from simple local properties in pattern matching to more complicated global properties in dead code elimination (Van Deursen 2001b).

Program Comprehension: The process of acquiring knowledge about a computer program (Georgia Tech 2001).

Program Statement: Basic construct of a program to present an instruction that will be executed to perform an action or a part of it.

Program Visualisation: Using graphics to make a program more understandable. It differs from Visual Programming, where the program is created graphically; in program visualisation, it is created in the normal, textual manner and the graphics are used afterwards to show how it works (Myers & Maulsby 2001).

SCPE: School of Continuing and Professional Education, one of the academic units of the Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Software Visualisation: The use of computer graphics and animation to illustrate and present computer programs, processes, and algorithms. Teachers can use software visualisation systems to help students understand how algorithms work, and they can be used in program development to help programmers understand their code better (Van Deursen 2001a).

List of Tables

Table 2.1: Links between research questions and literature review	26
Table 2.2: Summary of visual methods.....	55
Table 2.3: Summary of non-visual methods	64
Table 3.1: Research methods of relevant recent studies	118
Table 3.2: Students' HKCEE results (partial)	141
Table 3.3: Students' academic path after secondary school	141
Table 4.1: Participants' academic results	152
Table 4.2: Emerging concepts of learning difficulties	156
Table 4.3: Emerging concepts of learning strategies.....	158
Table 4.4: Emerging concepts of motivation/attitude	159
Table 4.5: Emerging concepts of students' conception	161
Table 4.6: Emerging concepts of teachers' conception	163
Table 4.7: Categories of students' background	165
Table 5.1: Improvement strategies against students' characteristics and learning difficulties	195

List of Figures

Figure 1.1: Academic path for sub-degree programs	11
Figure 2.1: The Learning Combination Lock (LCL)	84
Figure 2.2: The 4MAT system.....	86
Figure 3.1: Process of the grounded theory approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998)	131
Figure 3.2: Process of the grounded theory approach of Charmaz (2006)	132
Figure 3.3: Flow diagram of research design and procedures	139
Figure 4.1: Category 3: Students needed more guidance in learning	169
Figure 4.2: Core category and relating categories	170

Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of the Hong Kong sub-degree students in learning computer programming and explores ways to help the students learn more effectively.

In Hong Kong, sub-degree programs are offered to increase the number of students studying post-secondary education. The performance of the sub-degree students is weaker than that of undergraduate students. Learning computer programming is a challenge for most post-secondary students and especially for sub-degree students. A considerable amount of research has been done in teaching and learning programming in the last decade. However, most of this research was targeted to Western undergraduates. The findings of this research might not be applicable to Chinese students or to the weaker Hong Kong sub-degree students. This study attempts to fill this gap.

A theory-seeking case study research is conducted to investigate students' learning of programming. The researcher collected and analysed data from semi-structured interviews. Other data sources – active participant observations, reflective memos, and analysis of students' programming assignments and examination – are used to triangulate the data from the interviews.

The grounded theory that emerged, the theory of 'Performance Improvement of Programming', offers an exploratory insight into the experiences of the Hong Kong sub-degree students in learning to program. It addresses the distinctive challenges

facing Hong Kong students in learning, learning styles, and strategies. This study also suggests practical strategies in light of the students' characteristics in order to assist their learning of programming.